DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 344 CG 025 746

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TITLE Supervisee Resistance. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CG-94-12
PUB DATE Apr 94
CONTRACT RR93002004
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anxiety; Attitude Change; Change Strategies; Coping; Counselor Attitudes; *Counselors; Counselor Training; *Defense Mechanisms; Interpersonal Relationship; *Resistance (Psychology); *Stress Management; *Supervision; Supervisors
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on issues of supervisee resistance, defined as defensive behaviors of the supervisee that serve to reduce supervision-induced anxiety. It describes resistant behavior and identifies ways to counteract it, while noting that supervisee resistance is common. The purposes and goals of supervisee resistance, as manifested in verbal and nonverbal behaviors, are discussed and it is concluded that resistant behaviors, regardless of their form, are coping mechanisms intended to reduce anxiety created by the supervision. Supervisee "games" are identified and five types of resistance found in such games are noted: (1) submission; (2) turning the tables; (3) "I'm no good"; (4) helplessness; and (5) projection. Methods of counteracting resistance are suggested. The digest concludes that supervisee resistance will be encountered regardless of the supervisor's skill level, and that the supervisor can learn to take resistance and turn it into a supervisory advantage. Contains 8 references. (NB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

April 1994 EDO-CG-94-12

Supervisee Resistance

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Supervisee Resistance

Implicit in the definition of supervision is an ongoing relationship between supervisor and supervisee; the supervisee's acquisition of professional role identity; and, the supervisor's evaluation of the supervisee's performance (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992; Bradley, 1989). Although the goal of helping the supervisee develop into an effective counselor may appear simple, it can be ananxiety-provoking experience. Supervision-induced anxiety causes supervisees to respond in a variety of ways, with some of the responses being defensive. It is these defensive behaviors, which serve the purpose of reducing anxiety, that are referred to as resistance.

Although the purpose of this Digest is to describe supervisee resistance and identify ways to counteract it, we want to stress that supervisee resistance is common. While resistance can be disruptive and annoying, the supervisor must keep in mind that resistance is not synonymous with "bad person" or "bad behavior." Instead, resistance occurs because of the dynamics of the supervision process and, in fact, can be an appropriate response to supervision (e.g., supervisor conducting therapy instead of supervision). In other instances, resistance is a response to anxiety whereby it becomes the supervisor's role to deal with anxiety so that the need for resistance will be reduced or perhaps eliminated.

Resistant Behaviors

Purposes/Goals

Supervisee resistance, consisting of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, is the supervisee's overt response to changes in the supervision process. Liddle (1986) concluded that the primary goal of resistant behavior is self-protection in which the supervisee guards against some perceived threat. One common threat is fear of inadequacy; although supervisees want to succeed, there is a prevalent concern of not "measuring up" to the supervisor's standards. Other supervisee resistance occurs because supervision is required. Supervisees may not accept the legitimacy of supervision because they perceive their skills to be equal, if not superior, to their supervisor's. Supervisee resistance may be a reaction to loss of control and can evolve into a power struggle between supervisor and supervisee. Supervisees may fear and be threatened by change, and consequently, respond with defensive behaviors. The fact that supervision has an evaluative component can provoke anxiety because a negative evaluation by a supervisor may result in dismissal and/or failure to receive necessary recommendations. Supervisee resistance also may result from the supervisor failing to integrate multicultural information into the supervision sessions. Regardless of form, resistant behaviors are coping mechanisms intended to reduce anxiety.

Supervisee Games

Resistance often takes the form of "games" played by supervisees who either consciously or unconsciously attempt to manipulate and exert control over the supervision process. Although all supervisees do not play games, many do. Kadushin (1968) defined four categories of supervisee games. Manipulating demand levels involves games in which the supervisee attempts to manipulate the level of demands placed on him/her. Often the supervisee uses flattery to inhibit the supervisor's evaluative focus. Redefining the relationship occurs when the supervisee attempts to make the relationship more ambiguous. For example, in the game of self-disclosure, the supervisee would rather expose himself/herself instead of counseling skills. Reducing power disparity occurs when the supervisee focuses on his/her knowledge. In this game, the supervisee tries to prove the supervisor "is not so smart." If successful, the supervisee can mitigate some of the supervisor's power. In controlling the situation, the supervisee prepares questions to direct supervision away from his/her performance. Other means for controlling supervision include requesting undue prescriptions for dealing with clients, seeking reassurance by reporting how poorly work is progressing, asking others for help to erode supervisor authority, or selectively sharing information to obtain a positive evaluation. A more hostile and angry form of control involves blaming the supervisor for failure.

In describing supervisee games, Bauman (1972) discussed five types of resistance. Submission, a common form of resistance, occurs when the supervisee behaves as though the supervisor has all the answers. Turning the tables is a diversionary tactic used by the supervisee to direct the focus away from his/her skills. "I'm no good" occurs when the supervisee pleads fragility and appears brittle; the attempt is to prevent the supervisor from focusing on painful issues. Helplessness is a dependency game in which the supervisee absorbs "all" information provided by the supervisor. The fifth type of resistance projection, is a self-protection tactic in which the supervisee blames external problems for his/her ineffectiveness. More thorough discussions of supervisee (and

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supervisor) games are presented by Bernard and Goodyear (1992) and Bradley (1989).

Counteracting Resistance

Although resistance is a common occurrence in supervision, counteracting resistance is not simple. Two major factors influence methods used for counteracting resistance. First, the relationship is critical. A positive supervisory relationship grounded by trust, respect, rapport, and empathy is essential for counteracting resistance (Borders, 1989; Mueller & Kell, 1972). The second factor in counteracting resistance is the way the supervisory relationship is viewed. Supervisors viewing the relationship as the focal point in supervision usually advocate full exploration of conflicts. In contrast, supervisors viewing therapeutic work as the primary supervisory focus advocate a more limited exploration of conflicts.

Viewing resistance as a perceived threat, Liddle (1986) advocated that the conflict be openly discussed. First, she stated the focus should be on identifying the source of anxiety (or threat). Next, the focus should be on brainstorming to locate appropriate coping strategies for dealing with the conflict. Kadushin (1968) stated that the simplest way to cope with supervisee resistance exhibited in games is to refuse to play. He concluded it is more effective to share awareness of game-playing with the supervisee and focus on the disadvantages inherent in game-playing rather than on the dynamics of the supervisee's behavior.

Bauman (1972) discussed several techniques for managing supervisee resistance. Interpretation, the most direct confrontation, includes describing and interpreting the supervisee's resistance. Although less confrontive, feedback is also a form of direct confrontation. Clarification uses restatement to aid the supervisee in understanding his/her behavior. Generalizing resistance to other settings takes the focus away from the supervisory relationship and helps the supervisee recognize his/her maladaptive behaviors. Ignoring resistance is recommended only if the behavior can be eliminated without confrontation. Role-playing and alter-ego role playing, although more threatening, may be helpful in identifying the cause of resistant behavior. Audiotaping supervision sessions is helpful for managing resistance. Bauman noted that the success of a technique is dependent on the personalities of supervisor and supervisee and on the interaction between them. If confrontation is deemed inappropriate, Masters (1992) suggested positive reframing for reducing resistance. Positive reframing includes: empowering the supervisee, increasing the supervisee's self-esteem, and modeling effective methods of coping with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Conclusions

Regardless of purpose, resistance in supervision is a common experience and will be encountered irrespective of the supervisor's skill level. The supervisor who believes he/she can proceed through the supervision process without encountering resistance is setting an unrealistic expectation. Although usually annoying, supervisee resistance should not be perceived as a negative encounter or maladaptive behavior. On the contrary, an effective supervisor who is knowledgeable about the dynamics behind supervisee resistance can redirect the resistance to create a therapeutic supervision climate. In essence, the ability of the supervisor to take resistance and turn it into a supervisory advantage may be the hallmark for determining success or failure in supervision.

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